Why is that we know we have to—or want to—change, but find ourselves moving round in circles?

van Nistelrooij, A.T.M.; de Caluwe, L.I.A.

published in
Journal of Management Inquiry
2016

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Journal of Management Inquiry
2016, Vol. 25(2) 153–167

DOI: 10.1177/1056492615591853
jmi.sagepub.com
SAGE

Why Is That We Know We Have to—Or Want to—Change, but Find Ourselves Moving Around in Circles?

Antonie van Nistelrooij[1] and Léon de Caluwé[1,2]

Abstract

In this essay, we will explore a question which is widely recognized in the world of practitioners of change and which seems a problematic issue in any change process, but is badly understood in theory: "What is happening when there is a lot of enthusiasm about a change initiative and a lot of knowledge about the change, but nothing happens?" Why is coming into action so difficult in any change process? We ourselves, being scholars as well as practitioners, are in the middle of trying to understand the answers to these questions. In this essay, we will explore the literature to shed light on this. We discuss that (a) "people consistently act inconsistently," (b) resistance is a multi-layered and multi-meaning concept that needs reconceptualization, and (c) perception of the change recipient plays a pivotal role in every change process.

Keywords

organizational development, change management, organizational behavior

> Think how hard physics would be if particles could think.
>
> —Nobel laureate Murray Gell-Mann

Introduction

A change process is not and cannot be merely a rational process. We, as human individuals, do not see ourselves as physical particles that follow nicely set-out trajectories when we are pushed to change or receive external impulses. Moreover, under these kinds of circumstances, we tend to do things more recursively and in cycles, moving along a lot but not seeming to function or operate in what is supposed to be the "right'" direction. The latter is the typical behavior, which most of us associate with resistance as a result of planned change programs in combination with typical top-down change initiatives. However, this kind of behavior is not exclusive to typical top-down planned change initiatives. We know that initial enthusiasm can be intense and widespread in participative change initiatives and that empowerment and a sense of ownership unlock lots of energy. However, as earlier longitudinal research pointed out, under false colors, this can also be a certain recipe for enhancing inactive and cynical reactions (Sminia & Van Nistelrooij, 2006).

As practitioners of change, we know one or more examples in which solutions become problems. Recognizing that we—from time to time—seem to organize our way backward and that the greater the efforts we invest in changing things for the better, the less we seem to achieve; most of the time, blaming it on the "resistance" of others. In addition, as scholars as well, we believe that a response to a change initiative can include reactions both positive and negative—even both at the same time. This is what can be expected whenever two (or more) forces drive an individual in opposite directions (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2011; Peters, 2012). Our purpose with this essay is to advocate a view that captures more this kind of ambivalence and the circular movements people engage in responding to it.

Resistance to change in the management literature was just a decade ago presented as a simple concept; mostly as a metaphor derived from the natural sciences, in particular Newtonian physics, with a clear linear causal pattern, in which "every primary action has an equal and opposite reaction" (Fleming, 2005, p. 48). For example, the word "change" itself triggers emotional reactions (Cartwright, 1951, p. 381), as in response to "the fallacy of programmatic change" (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990, p. 159), as a response to the threat of the status quo (Carly Fiorina, 2007 at www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3IbKbDhfKw), as a response to the threat of established relationships within the group (Lawrence, 1969),

[1]VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[2]Twynstra Gudde, Amersfoort, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:
Antonie van Nistelrooij, Assistant Professor, Department Organization Studies, VU University Amsterdam, DBL 859, Boelelaan 1081c, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: antonievnistelrooij@gmail.com

and as a response to a threat of personal feelings or the way people make sense of the world (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002). Looking through recent management literature, we see, in general, two shifts in the conceptualization of "resistance." First, a shift from a simple one-dimensional concept to a more complex multidimensional concept (Szabla, 2007), including a broad array of interactional factors that occur at more than one level (Holt & Vardaman, 2013). Second, that from a physical phenomenon with a negative connotation to a more identity-based social phenomenon (Fleming, 2005; Mahadevan, 2012), with a positive connotation in which "resistance" no longer is seen as representing a hindrance, but even integral to successful change (Ford & Fedor, 2009, p. 31; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011, p. 23).

When we cannot make a choice between two or more contradictions, because both contradictory perspectives are acceptable and present, it can become a paradox (Cameron, 1986,; Peters, 2012). Or, for that matter, it can become a typical catch-22 situation in which the only solution is denied by a circumstance inherent in the same situation (Burhans, 1973). What the mind seemingly cannot think, it must think; what reason is reluctant to express, it must express. In these kinds of ambiguous contexts, we find ourselves in a blurry situation, not able to name or see the contradiction itself. We become more and more tense as we realize ourselves that we are in a situation we don't want to be in and don't see our way out of it without the help of others. Not to mention the fact that we don't seem to have the capacity to combine or integrate the different perspectives relevant for making progress in these kinds of ambiguous situations. In spite of this, it is much argued in the strategic management literature that success over time is rooted in adopting a "both/and" approach—and by doing so becoming ambidextrous (e.g., Smith, Binns, & Tushman, 2010, p. 449). However, we tend to agree with Tushman (cited in Seong, Kim, & Szulanski, 2015) that you can't do ambidexterity by yourself alone. Managing strategic paradoxes simultaneously with a senior team is a completely different thing to handling straightforward ambiguous situations as an individual. Confronted with paradoxes simultaneously is, as we see it, for the most of us, like driving in a car punching the gas and hitting the brakes at the same time, and as a consequence spinning around in a circle, producing a lot of noise and smoke while you don't get an inch forward. A phenomenon that has all the same ingredients as that of the story of the Red Queen running as hard as she can around a tree to stay at the same place in Lewis Carroll's well-known novella, *Through the Looking Glass*.

In his lecture *The Perception of Change* at Oxford in 1911, Nobel prize winner Henri Bergson (1946) mentioned,

> The point is that usually we look at change but we do not see it. We speak of change, but we do not think it. We say that change exists, that everything changes, that change is the very law of things: yes, we say it and we repeat it; but those are only words, and we reason and philosophize as though change does not exist. (p. 131)

As we shall describe in the examples further on, in response to a change initiative, an urgent request or a life-threatening message, you can see people putting a lot of effort into a lot of things, even perceiving progression, but at the same time, there is none. Moreover, action and motion are conditional terms for change to be seen, but aren't in themselves sufficient to be sure that change is in the making. Much depends on what we perceive as change. Seemingly, much depends on what we perceive as real. Or, as Bergson (1946, as cited by Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) advises us, "Only a direct perception of reality will enable one to get a glimpse of its most salient characteristics—its constantly changing texture, its indivisible continuity, the conflux of the same with the different over time" (p. 571). Interesting in this regard is one of Lewin and Grabbe's (1948) premises "that what exists as a reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as a reality within the total social setting" (p. 57). It makes clear that only by anchoring a person's own conduct in something as large and super-individual as the whole social setting, can individuals stabilize new beliefs sufficiently to keep them immune from the day-to-day fluctuations of moods and influences to which they are subjected (Van Nistelrooij & Sminia, 2010). These remarks stress the importance of active participation, sharing meaning, and interactive and collective sensemaking processes in organizations. If we are to understand how change recipients respond to change initiatives, we need to examine the kind of processes through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way, violate expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Organizational life is full of moments of ambiguity and uncertainty, and the notion of sensemaking has gained widespread traction and become a critically important topic in the study of organizations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). According to these authors, sensemaking is the process through which individuals seek to clarify what is going on when they encounter moments of ambiguity or uncertainty (Balogun, 2006). With this kind of definitions, making sense of one's context seems to be a cognitive and conscious process. Apparently, we humans seek "sense" by extracting and interpreting cues from our environment, using these as the basis for a plausible account that provides order that "makes sense" (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). However, without knowing it, our conscious way of looking at cues is in itself limited and contaminated by, for example, our earlier experiences, education, relationships with relevant others, the (changing) context we are in, but most of all by all kinds of unconscious social perception processes (Dijksterhuis, Aarts, & Smith, 2005; Dijksterhuis & Van Knippenberg, 1998; Festinger,

Schachter, & Back, 1950; Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2011). We tend to agree with Tsoukas and Chia (2002) that

> change is the reweaving of actors' webs of beliefs and habits of action as a result of new experiences obtained through interactions. Insofar as this is an ongoing process, that is, to the extent actors try to make sense of and act coherently in the world, change is inherent in human action. (p. 570)

So, framing sensemaking as solely cognitive and conscious or even as a pure individual process, focused on seeking, appraisal, and interpretation, described in terms of developing frameworks, schemata, or mental models, doesn't serve the purpose of this essay.

When we acknowledge that we humans have the capacity for shared meanings or symbolic action (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), we also have to accept that we humans are able to interactively mediate behavioral outcomes perceived as adaptive, new, and at the same time as "new wine into old wineskins," and as "moving around in circles" (p. 1575). Change is always a question of what changes and what stays the same. Or for example, as a popular French saying says, "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*," meaning that the more things change, the more things stay the same. The key is to see change as having both component issues and forces, what changes and what stays the same, rather than just change alone. With this, we like to stress the importance of approaching change from a whole, which is a notion coming from the gestalt, systemic, and cybernetic sciences (Atwater, Kannan, & Stephens, 2008; B. G. Hanson, 1995). Looking from a whole means that we are more focused on the ongoing dynamics and behavioral patterns between parts in a given context than the characteristics of the parts themselves. Moreover, it also means that we move away from the notion that a human is merely a simple point for relaying stimuli into responses, and that we instead take a more fine-mazed point of view by interconnecting perceptive and manifest behavioral patterns. Furthermore, with a more holistic or cybernetic approach, we aren't only looking into the change content or the change process but also into the change context and the influence it has on sensemaking (Lockett, Currie, Martin, & Waring, 2014). So, what we are saying here is, if you are looking at change, much depends on your own perspective; do you see the whole or just a part of it? Or to put it in other words, "when you look at change do you see people, their behaviors, their relations, or all these aspects at once—as interrelated parts of a whole?"

Looking from a holistic or cybernetic perspective means that we look specifically at how outcomes are fed back to the performing whole—which can be a group of people, an echelon, an organization, or even a network of organizations. What belongs to such a whole and what not is mostly determined by a shared purpose, the intensity of the interconnectedness of the parts (i.e., interdependency), and the way it behaves differently from the rest. Feedback is in this regard more than "a report given back," but is about news (conveyed as a "difference") that made a subsequent "difference" in a future conduct (Keeney, 2007, p. 886). With this, a cybernetic perspective brings into the change literature a paradigmatic shift from a lineal to a circular causality (Atwater et al., 2008; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007). As pointed out by Keeney (2007), "as Bateson and other founding cyberneticians considered the image of a circle, they became aware that what they were considering was more akin to an Ouroboros, the mythical snake that swallowed its own tail" (p. 887). In short, every time events go around in a circle, like the Red Queen around the tree, the circle stays inside the whole, so although it seems to be a difference (the feedback from the first outcome), the whole doesn't change. This circular process of "digestion" can probably best be compared with the concept of recursion from the strategic management literature (e.g., Jarzabkowski, 2004). In cybernetics, recursive processes are circularly organized loops that feedback the whole of themselves, thereby maintaining their integrity/autonomy, while the context of the whole does change.

With this approach, we try to emphasize the circular and recursive nature of change processes through which people seem to do lots of things, but mostly unconsciously, stopping themselves changing or learning and by doing so preventing change from happening. We shall elaborate on these insights later. First, we describe four examples, which for us were the starting point for digging into the literature for examples of human mechanisms and theoretical concepts that might give some kind of explanation of the ambivalent behavior in these examples. This search brings us to a renewed acquaintance with fields such as communication systems therapy (Watzlawick, 1978, 1990), organizational psychology (E. M. Hanson, 2002), and cybernetic therapy (Keeney, 2007; O'Hanlon & Wilk, 1987). This results in the formulation of the following questions that we want to explore in this essay:

1. What is happening when there is much enthusiasm about a change initiative and a great deal of knowledge about what to do to change, but nothing seems to happen?
2. By exploring specialized literature on ambivalent and circular social behavior, what is explained by the underlying mechanisms that are often mislabeled as "resistance?"

We start with four examples that illustrate the above discussion.

Example 1.

Each of us is very well aware of the fact that smoking is very dangerous to health and that it causes life-threatening diseases. We are also very well aware that being overweight might also cause serious disease. And we know that sport is

very beneficial for the body, mind, and health. But to move from that awareness and knowledge to real action is very difficult for almost everybody. Sometimes we succeed in moving into action for a certain period of time. That costs a lot of effort. But what seems to be even more difficult is to maintain the change after a while. That seems to be too much for many of us.

Example 2.

Another example is given in the comparative medical study by Darr, Astin, and Atkin (2008), which shows that only one out of seven people with life-threatening heart problems actually does anything to change his or her lifestyle. They do not lack a sense of urgency, as Kegan and Lahey (2009) underlined. The incentives for change of behavior in these research cases could not be greater. How can a goal as compelling as "I want to stay alive" possibly conflict with anything else?

Example 3.

A union officer is mostly an independent operating professional—working with a certain ideology and using their own methods, focused on representing, facilitating, emancipating, and empowering union members. For a union to be successful, it is important to have enough members who are satisfied with the services offered by their union representatives. Confronted with a continuous decrease in the number of members in the last 3 years, a business manager of a union expected the employees to become more accountable in delivering union services, recruiting members, and realizing strategic targets over the next 2 years. During several interactive sessions, union officers, team leaders, managers, and administrative staff members discussed the urgency of these measures and the best way they could be implemented. After 2 years, it became clear that nothing had changed for the better; in fact, nothing happened at all, and members are still leaving their union in substantial numbers. It became clear that in a worst-case scenario, there would be no union members left to work for. But what could be done? All those involved were well aware of the urgency of their situation. Everybody was eager to do something and really wanted to change the way the union operates. But, instead of pulling together to cope with the challenges, people went on with their own idiosyncratic ways of working, did not find ways to act accordingly, and opposed each other's ideas for change.

Example 4.

A business school that specialized in offering MBA education and in-company management development programs had just survived severe cutbacks in which half the staff lost their jobs. In the following months, the remaining employees, who successfully applied for their current upgraded jobs, did not seem to manage the daily challenges and opportunities. Moreover, they did not seem to cope at all. Despite some incidental positive national media exposure, everything—sales, turnover, cash flow, and morale—seemed to decline and to accelerate in a downward spiral. In short, during monthly gatherings, the CEO briefed his staff on the exact financial figures so that everyone knew that it was essential to get things done for the survival of the business school as a whole. After more than 6 months of unproductive behavior and internal dissatisfaction, the CEO decided that something drastic had to be done and hired an external specialist to boost morale and bring staff into line with the new strategic targets. In a series of individual interviews, it became clear that everybody was well aware of the urgent financial situation. It also became clear that the majority of employees were struggling with impressions and perceptions of how things went during the cutbacks and the following period of reapplication. There was, in general, a sense of injustice about how things were done, a certain amount of disappointment in the way the CEO had managed things during the transition period, and, in some specific cases, people displayed strong emotions toward each other. Despite all this, most of the interviewees also seemed to know exactly what had to be done. During an interactive large group intervention, the problems, results, and suggestions for the follow-up were talked through and validated with the entire staff. Although there was much agreement on the main points, there was a lack of agreement on the specifics. To cope with this, a procedure was agreed on with the employees' council. A small and well-composed group that represented all the existing functions and that also included members of the employees' council worked out the outcomes in further detail and gave the CEO clear and specific advice about what to do. The CEO copy-pasted this advice and presented it back to the employees' council, which gave—to the complete and utter surprise of the CEO—negative advice, disapproved the proposals made by the CEO, and questioned his competence to implement the decisions. This led to new disputes within the organization and the whole process came (again) to a halt.

In our view, these examples shed a clear light on our basic questions for this essay. If people cannot make the changes they want, when their lives are on the line, how can we expect organization members at any level and in any kind of organization to successfully change something as relatively trivial as the way they do their job? As Kegan and Lahey (2009) concluded,

> The change challenges, that today's leaders and their employees face, are not, for the most part, a problem of will. The problem is the inability to close the gap between what we genuinely, even passionately, want and what we are actually able to do. (p. 2)

We do not act on what we know is clearly in our own best interests. Something blocks us or prevents us from moving

into action. Much seems to be hidden or subconscious or is completely embedded in the linear way we perceive things, how we look at ourselves and interact with others.

After these examples, we describe some mechanisms and concepts we found in the process-systemic approaches to change, which give an understanding of the paradoxical nature of the situations we set out in the examples. After this, we explore why we cannot label these situations as typical examples of "resistance." We will see that "resistance" as it is presented in the change literature is inadequate as an explanation for what is happening. By exchanging the "management" or "interventionst" perspective for that of the change recipient, in the section "The Change Recipient, the Role of Perception, and Belief Systems," we try to emphasize the pivotal role of (social) perception and belief systems. In the concluding section, we will present conclusions and ideas for further discussion.

What Is Happening and How Are These Mechanisms Labeled in the Specialized Literature?

In this section, we describe the concepts that we have found in the literature that give us a different kind of perspective on what is happening when change is wanted and nothing happens.

Contradictions and Paradoxes Are Part of Reality

"Major change programs are rife with inner contradictions." By this, Argyris (1998) stated that even when change programs are implemented correctly, they do not—and cannot—foster the behavior they are meant to inspire. Programmed processes, even the ones that are designed to stimulate empowerment, are in fact programs that define employees' actions almost exclusively from the outside. According to Argyris, the resulting behavior cannot be empowering and liberating. "Do your own thing, the way we tell you." In Argyris' opinion, these kinds of contradictions need to be brought to the surface and addressed to be dealt with successfully. If they are not, they will inhibit the kind of personal commitment that management says it wants.

Contradictions aren't always seen to be so inhibiting for change and development. Moreover, as argued by Cameron (1986), more generally, contradictions are a sine qua non for organizations to be effective. It is healthy to have attributes that are simultaneously contradictory. Furthermore, contradictions are not only food for thought, as Bateson (1979) argued, but in fact, also food for change. To adapt, develop, and progress, we need opposing perspectives. Or, as Cameron (1986, p. 545) puts it, "these contradictory perspectives are equally necessary to convey a more imposing, illuminating, life-related or provocative insight into truth than either factor can muster in its own right." In a recent study on decision making by senior management teams, Smith (2014) concluded that managing paradoxical tensions was reflected in the pattern of decisions over time, rather than each individual decision. She describes this pattern as a "consistently inconsistent" pattern of decision making or "dynamic decision-making" to capture the flexibility of support for exploration and exploitation.

A paradox can be seen as a construct where elements of our thoughts, actions, or emotions that seem logical when considered in isolation are juxtaposed, appearing mutually exclusive. An individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time is experiencing mental stress and discomfort, an experience that is labeled by Festinger (1962) as "cognitive dissonance." This stress and discomfort may also arise within an individual who holds a belief and performs a contradictory action or reaction. According to Festinger, the stress is a source for motivation in trying to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance. And by doing this, the individual will actively avoid situations and information that would likely increase the dissonance. The result is often an experience of absurdity or paralysis (Luscher, Lewis, & Ingram, 2006). One sees contradicting values, which one seems unable to reconcile. However, gradually, one might see that both aspects of the paradox are needed, because they need one another to be able to exist. Choosing one or the other will have negative effects. Seeing and coping with paradox seem to be, as it is with contradictions, a way of looking differently at the situation at hand. For example, instead of looking at the situation as "either . . . or . . . ," it can also be " . . . and . . . and . . . ." Put this way, coping with contradictions and paradoxes seems just a way of reframing, with a central role for perception. But it can also be seen as more of a condition sine qua non for change to emerge, as suggested by Seo and Creed (2002).

In the view of Seo and Creed, contradiction and paradox can be seen as a common feature at the core of social change. From this viewpoint, it seems that getting stuck in a contradiction or paradox is just a functional phase, a kind of prerequisite for motivating people to engage in new interactions. Change emerges because paradoxes are in fact the tensions that motivate and mobilize actors to create new interaction patterns that subsequently are embedded in our interaction or are institutionalized. Nonetheless, regarding our examples, it doesn't seem that contradictions and paradoxes are the motivational factor in all cases as the next mechanism shows.

Pocket Veto

This term originates from the political sciences. It describes the right of the president of the United States not to approve a bill that has already been passed by Congress, by not signing it into law. The president can put it, metaphorically speaking, in his back pocket until the time for approving the bill has expired. Congress is aware of this and has no choice

but to accept this prerogative. E. M. Hanson (2002) used this term to describe the power that (for instance) professionals have when changes or innovations are introduced: "The power is exerted through inaction; in other words: the professionals simply do not respond to requests or mandates for change" (p. 97). Pocket vetoes come to the surface in situations of pressure, top-down decisions, and hierarchy. When you force people to do things they do not believe in, they will learn to use the pocket veto. It can be pressure by an individual manager or by a group in a department. Managers often see pocket vetoes as sabotage: People do not want to do what they are asking. From the standpoint of an employee, pocket veto is more a way of surviving an unfriendly environment, a wish that is not taken seriously or something one should not be asked. The employee is then able to do what he or she really believes is the right thing to do. Pocket veto is in many cases not a conscious act. It emerges as a self-evident act in line with unconscious beliefs and assumptions: "I do not do this or believe this" or "This is not a good thing to do," "My boss is only a human being and he has not got this right." Managers can create pocket vetoes in just minutes. To get rid of them might take months. The serious point of pocket veto is that it clogs up communication channels, especially from bottom to top. Only unimportant matters are in those channels. And a big wall might develop between the upper management layer and the shop floor.

Competing Commitment

According to Kegan and Lahey (2001), many people are unwittingly applying productive energy toward a hidden competing commitment. The resulting dynamic equilibrium stalls the effort in what looks like resistance but is in fact a kind of personal immunity to change. These competing commitments are strongly connected to underlying assumptions, which are woven into the very fabric of people's existence. These assumptions are often formed long ago and seldom, if ever, critically examined; and in fact, people rarely realize they hold these assumptions because, quite simply, they accept them as reality (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). The authors suggest that these assumptions reflect the very human manner in which we invent or shape a picture of the world. These pictures, representations of the world as we perceive it, create a disarming and deluding sense of certainty. The authors suggest that we stop testing these representations once we reach adulthood. But the authors ask themselves "how can we be sure that our maps do match the territory?" Letting go of this certainty is for many of us quite an impossible task. The approach of Kegan and Lahey is based on the big idea that competing commitments are sustained by assumptions, and that these assumptions form the entrance to a three-stage change process. The process itself is mainly a chain of one-on-one interventions based on (a) identifying individuals' competing commitments—let them make a self-disclosing statement about it; (b) getting clarification and recognition by the owner on the underlying assumption; and (c) taking some immediate action to overcome their immunity.

Double Bind

In essence, a double bind happens in a situation in which (a) the individual, in most cases, the change message recipient, is involved in an intense relationship in which he or she feels he or she must get the communication right; (b) the other party, mostly the communicator, is expressing two levels of messages, in which one message denies the other; and (c) the change recipient is unable to comment on the contradiction, that is, he or she is unable to make "meta-communicative statements" that might help to resolve the mess. These ingredients, endlessly replayed, result on a micro level in an individual becoming inactive, on a meso-level in groups becoming fully dysfunctional, and on a macro level a whole organization becoming non-responsive to change. A "double bind" is developed as a result of repeated contradictory messages, recurring conflicting social perceptions, and conflicting commitments within and between individuals and groups (Sluzki & Ransom, 1976). These messages for a double bind are mostly sent on different levels of abstraction and can be stated implicitly within the context of the situation, or conveyed by tone of voice or body language (Bateson, 1976). Based on his research at the Palo Alto institute, Bateson and his colleagues suggest that double binds are often utilized as a form of control without open coercion—the paradox itself makes them difficult to respond to or resist. It creates a situation in which a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other (and vice versa), so that the person will be automatically wrong regardless of the response. The following are examples of sentences that create competing commitments from the side of the change communicator—the sentence by Argyris cited earlier: "Do your own thing—the way we tell you"; "You must be more spontaneous"; "We must have open communication"; "You will learn this, when you are doing it"; and "I will tell you how we can work together." The double bind occurs when the person cannot confront the inherent dilemma, and therefore cannot resolve it or opt out of the situation. This means that people can experience contradictions and other difficulties in assigning the correct communicational mode to the message they receive. Moreover, it also means that people can experience contradictions, even subconsciously, when assigning the correct communicational mode to their own beliefs, perceptions, and emotions. And all this worsens when they find themselves in a position in which it seems impossible to act on the perceived contradiction, either by acting or communicating on it, or by leaving the field of interaction. That is why—without adequate interventions—a double bind can be very emotionally distressing for everyone involved.

The Process of Behavior Oscillation

That physical and mental processes interact and form inextricable behavior patterns is the primordial idea that gave birth to cybernetics (Keeney, 1983). *Behavior oscillation* is a cybernetic term originally referring to the characteristic symptom of negative feedback structures in social systems in which the information used to take goal-seeking action is delayed. In such cases, a control action is not based on the current state of a group of people but on some previous state or value. Using dated information to control the approach to a change target is likely to cause the group to miss or overshoot its goal. When a social system—let's say the whole group of participants—is caught in a feedback loop in which the corrective behaviors overshoot, its action will also appear to wildly oscillate (Keeney, 1983).

For example, employees may be troubled by incoherent, ambiguous, unclear, or double bind messages that the company is going to be restructured in the near future. Although a manager responds by complaining that he is not able to realize successfully the intended change because of the "resistance" of the employees, one implication is that the symptoms he perceives serve to protect him from being too direct and pushy and having the risk of becoming disliked by the employees, something he is secretly (or unconsciously) nervous about. When this nervousness (or anxiety), for example, about being accepted by the group of employees, calms down, the employees begin to do things as if nothing happened and stay inactive. This then results in the manager having an anxiety episode—for example, by the thought that he will be the only one not realizing the change targets as they were set for the whole organization. This then can result in overachieving and straightforward interventions by the manager, triggering the actual blocking of the change by the employees.

People don't always see that they are interdependent of each other in realizing shared goals, interpersonal communications, which in itself can bring endemic episodes of social disorganization. Any focus of patterned interpersonal relationships in such a setting can be observed to oscillate between states of more harmonious functioning and states of greater discord. The frequency and intensity of these oscillations are determined, hypothetically, by the degree to which individuals are susceptible to disturbance, because of personal instabilities, the degree to which permissiveness is exercised, and the degree to which the social structure fosters interpersonal "contagion," that is, "feedback" of communications. Deviant behavior and the accompanying social disorganization within this framework are attended by intrapersonal and interpersonal tensions. These tension states need not be seen as destructive and therefore categorically to be avoided. On the contrary, they may have constructive and even therapeutic value (Rapoport, 1956).

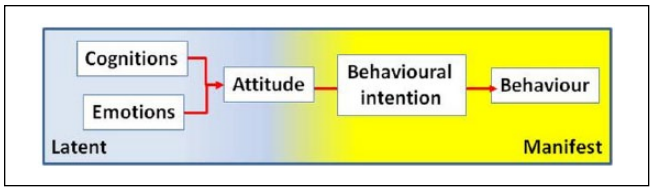

Figure 1. Classic conception of planned behavior models.

How Can We Understand the Mechanisms Labeled "Resistance?"

Resistance is mostly seen as manifest and conscious behavior within a given social context that, according to a series of publications (Ileris, 2004; Piderit, 2000; Prochaska, Norcross, & Diclemente, 1994; Szabla, 2007), refers to interconnections between cognitive, emotional, and attitudinal components. In this section, we reflect on some of the key ideas on resistance, which seem to be—in the light of our previous examples and arguments—taken for granted.

Resistance Is More Than an Outcome of a Rational and Predictable Process

The notion of resistance to change can be credited to Kurt Lewin. According to his biographer, friend, and PhD student Alfred Marrow (1969), Lewin evolved this concept "based on the 'person' as a complex energy field in which all behaviour could be conceived of as a change in some state of a field" (p. 30). This way of looking at personal behavior in a certain context seems to fit remarkably well with our examples and arguments. It is almost a shame that we scholars seem to have lost this point of view in the way we conceptualize "resistance." For a typical example of this, we refer to the classic literature on planned change (Azjen, 1988; Fishbein & Azjen, 1975). Their point of view is that change is based on the assumption that the intention to engage in a new particular behavior is the result of a rational linear process that is goal-oriented, as shown in Figure 1.

As presented in Figure 1, change in the traditional planned behavior models follows a one-dimensional logical sequence from cognition/emotion, attitude, via intention to changed behavior (Gibbons, Gerrard, Blanton, & Russell, 1998). This concept seems far too simplistic. As Lewin already stated in the 1940s, "If all three of these (cognitions, emotions, attitudes)—and the processes which give rise to them—were governed by the same laws, change itself would be much simpler" (Lewin & Grabbe, 1948, p. 59). Lord and Levy (1994); Johnson, Chang, and Lord (2006); and Douglas et al. (2008) showed in their studies that all three—cognitions, emotions, and attitudes—have in their own respect different characteristics, different processing speeds, and different behavior-influencing capabilities. They are based on different types of human processing.

Unfortunately, for people who like to plan, plot, and predict human behavior, change is not simple. As a consequence, the way people react is less certain and, as our examples and concepts from the literature show, far more unpredictable, as suggested by the sequences in the classic planned behavior models.

Resistance Is More Than an Attitude Toward Change

One of the early experiments of Asch (1940) showed that the primary process in influence is not change in attitudes toward an object but rather change in the definition and psychological meaning of the object. Based on these and other findings, it may be presumed that when psychological meaning changes, attitudes change accordingly (Wood, 2000). Moreover, people do not resist change per se. Or, as Dent and Goldberg (1999) argued, people may resist loss of status, loss of pay, or loss of comfort, but this felt loss is not the same as resisting change. Resistance to change does not per se reflect a physical blockade or tangible opposition, as proposed by Kotter (1995); it is more a result of internal and social perception processes. Lewin and Grabbe (1948) originally postulated that "social action no less than physical action is steered by social perception" (p. 61). If we grasp an object, the movement of our hand is steered by its perceived position in the perceived surroundings. Likewise, as Lewin and Grabbe stated, our social behaviors are steered by the position in which we perceive ourselves and relevant others within the total setting. For example, the experiments by Asch in the early 1940s dealing with perception and (perceived) group pressure on individual group members show what exists as "reality" for the individual is, to a large degree, determined by what he or she perceives as being socially accepted as reality. Human beings continuously construct and deconstruct mental images of their surroundings, translating these, accumulating knowledge, comparing, and integrating them with already existing knowledge, images, and beliefs. The way people perceive their world is, in fact, a mental construct, deeply embedded and based on experiences, education, and other impulses. These mental models create a disarming and deluding sense of certainty, and for us, they are the reality that is automatically molding our everyday behavior (Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

Gersick (1991) taught us that the uncertainty that is inherent in periods of change fosters divergent thinking around which a new cognitive structure can crystallize; after a while, "things fall into place." This point of view is supported by the study of Isabella (1990). She found that managers evolve through a four-stage model of interpretation, going from a disorganized frame to a well-constructed evaluative frame at the end of the change period. In addition, Boulding (1988) has suggested that inappropriate mental models are one of the primary factors causing organizational dysfunction today. This can eventually threaten the survival of some organizations. Argyris (1990) argued that most people can identify the counterproductive actions other people cause, but at the same time, they seem to experience difficulty in perceiving their own actions as counterproductive or identify those actions as "resistance" (p. 13). The absence of this kind of self-reflective capacity can have an escalating effect on the intensity of the "resistance" people develop.

Resistance Is More Than a Conscious State of Mind

As Wood (2000) concluded, attitudes are social phenomena, which emerge from and are embedded in social interaction. This is an important link in interpreting resistance and coping with it. And, as such, the link is strangely enough completely absent in the classic planned behavior models. Moreover, we think that these components are intertwined with each other, and that, as a result, the outcome in terms of new behaviors is not only much less predictable but also far more diffuse and inconsistent. As Chin and Benne (1976) argued, changes in patterns of action are believed to be the consequence of alterations in normative structures such as assumptions and beliefs, in roles and relationships as well as in perceptual orientations. Changes in attitude alone will not result in new behavioral patterns unless there is also some change achieved in deeper structures such as beliefs and assumptions and in perceptions of the self and the situation. Recently, Elias (2009) showed that our beliefs and attitudes are linked with our subconscious assumptions and are, in general, the starting point for a positive or negative evaluative judgment. According to Kegan and Lahey (2001), assumptions play a pivotal role in a learning process, in which we test mental representations of what we think works in a given situation. According to them, it seems to be a circular, interactive relation; many of our representations, perceptions, and commitments are sustained by the same assumptions. So that what looks like resistance is, in fact, an automatic response or learned conditioned behavior.

Some decades earlier, Douglas McGregor (1960) illustrated that beliefs are in most cases implicit, sometimes quite unconscious, and often conflicting. But they nevertheless determine our predictions that if we do a, b will occur. Human behavior is, as McGregor saw it, predictable, but, as in physical science, accurate prediction hinges on the correctness of underlying beliefs and assumptions. The same point is made later on by Argyris (1990), who stated that people hold assumptions, and that we make inferences from them about our surroundings (the territory). Furthermore, in his many years working with managers, McGregor (1960) observed that the common practice of proceeding without explicit examination of assumptions leads, at times, to remarkable inconsistencies in human behavior. People rarely realize they hold assumptions. Moreover, some people, such

as Senge (1990), are convinced that these assumptions are so deeply embedded that people do not even realize that they imply simplified models of reality. For them, they are the reality. As a result, without knowing it consciously, they are woven into the very fabric of our existence. Mostly formed during childhood and adolescence, we stop critically examining them as we enter into adulthood (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Without consciously knowing, we accept our assumptions about the world as a given and self-evident reality. But these assumptions are in fact a map, a navigation tool, and not the territory itself in which we live. Without testing to be sure whether they still work in a given situation, assumptions become obsolete and will induce behavior that is not adequate for the continuously changing surroundings. Argyris (1990) argued that, whenever human beings are faced with the kinds of inadequacies that contain significant embarrassment, anxiety, or threat, the basic strategy involves bypass and cover-up. When other people in the same organization use these actions, the actions become the actual behavior manifested, which become organizational norms. These actions come to be viewed as logical, rational, sensible, and realistic, but are, in fact, based on inappropriate assumptions that are no longer adequate.

Resistance Is More Than a Linear Response

Change is about shifting interpretations and fine-tuning what makes sense, making inferences and recalibrating our assumptions. It is mainly an ongoing unconscious process, which provides us with different understandings of the world around us, based on the way our perception machinery works, and which serves as the main trigger for our behavior, also influencing our affections and emotions. Inspired by Bateson (1979), Tsoukas and Chia (2002) stressed the importance of perception:

> In perception we are responsive to difference, to change. I can feel the bump in the road because of the difference between the level of the road and the level of the top of the bump. I can see that morale in the department has dropped because of the difference between how people feel now and the time when the department was full of life. The undifferentiated is imperceptible. The more sensitive one is to differences, ever more subtle, the more perceptive one will be. (p. 571)

On a social interactive level, resistance is about manifest behavior, conations, language, coping mechanisms, and defense skills that we bring to a given social context. In interaction with others, we influence and trigger the perception processes, emotions, and responses of others. Interaction, therefore, enhances our consciousness of our behavior, feelings, and our own responses. As a consequence, by all accounts, everyone's response is circular and not linear. What exists as a reality for the individual is, to a large degree, determined by what is socially accepted as a reality within the total social setting, of which we perceive ourselves and others to be part (Van Nistelrooij & Sminia, 2010). Moreover, how close we feel to other people is an important determinant of everyday life social interaction. We experience only ourselves, here and now, and anything that is not perceived directly is psychologically distant (Stephan et al., 2011). Also related to social perception are the earlier findings of Festinger et al. (1950), showing that spatial proximity increases interpersonal closeness, feelings, and the perception of familiarity and similarity. For example, these authors found that people are more likely to develop close relationships with residents of nearby apartments than with those who live farther away. Notably, spatial distance between residents in these studies was associated with opportunities for exposure, interaction, and exchange. More recently, Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996); Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg (1998); and Dijksterhuis et al. (2005) demonstrated unconscious and unintentional effects of perception on social behavior in a series of studies and experiments.

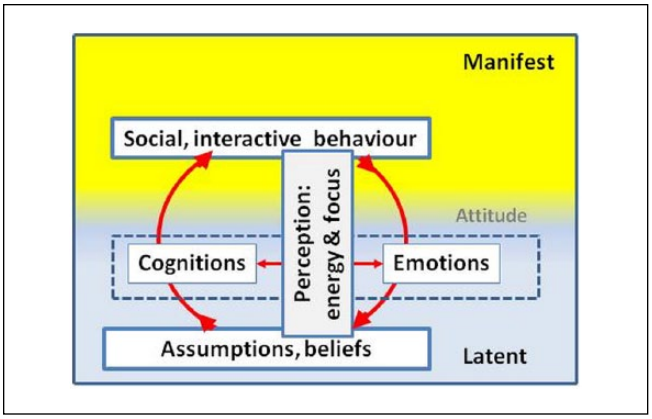

Figure 2. Integrated and dynamic concept of resistance.

Perceptions are interlinked with deeply ingrained assumptions or images (Senge, 1990), which influence how we understand the world and how we think about deciding to take action in a certain situation. We attempt to visualize this premise in Figure 2. Based on this premise, we suspect that a change process has to fulfill a task that is essentially equivalent to a change in assumptions, beliefs, cognitions, and emotions, and that starts with perception.

As implied in Figure 2, perception is directly connected to our deeper structures as well as to the way we give meaning to our own social interactive behavior and that of others in a given situation. This process of giving meaning to the signals in our surroundings is filtered by our beliefs and assumptions. In the same way, perception can be conceptualized as directly triggering cognitions and emotions in response to this process of giving meaning. In the next section, we will focus further on the pivotal role of perception, especially from the perspective of the change recipient.

The Change Recipient, the Role of Perception, and Belief Systems

We try to hold on to who we are. We aim for stability, trying to maintain our beliefs, attitudes, and personality. We have a mechanism that Kloosterboer (2011) called "dynamic conservatism": This is the inclination to adapt external information, impulses, and interventions to our own mental models, beliefs, and frames. The mechanism is aimed at keeping anything that is new or different on the outside. To some extent, however, change is inevitably an excursion into the unknown. It implies, as Menzies-Lyth (1960) pointed out, a commitment to future events that are not entirely predictable and to their consequences; it inevitably provokes uncertainty, doubt, and anxiety. A group that has learned to hold a common set of assumptions perceives, feels, and sees the external world in a certain shared way, which generates automatic behavior patterns that are typical for this group (Schein, 1990). These patterns provide meaning, comfort, order, and ways of coping with this uncertainty, doubt, and anxiety. Anxiety is likely to be more manifest and intense when people perceive the changes as having an impact on their social relationships and when they feel they are contradictory to the common set of assumptions and beliefs. The circular dynamics in a change process will be intensified when the change is perceived as contradictory to our beliefs and assumptions and the way we experience our existing social relationships. We believe that resistance to social change can be better understood if it is seen as the resistance of groups unconsciously clinging to their assumptions and beliefs, because proposed changes threaten existing social defenses against deep and intense anxieties (see also Jaques, 1955).

Individuals who are not committed to the organization, who have distanced themselves, and who have chosen to play it safe do not have a serious problem. They find comfort and protection in their defensive routines and their consequences (Argyris, 1990; Menzies-Lyth, 1960; Shapiro & Carr, 1991). You will not notice any resistance from or with these people. The situation is different for individuals who genuinely care about organizational performance, who feel proud to aspire toward excellence, who are committed, and who want to be involved. For them, the intended change raises all kinds of internal tensions because, in accepting the situation as it is, they are violating their own sense of integrity. How do they live with this violation? One way for individuals to deal with their pent-up feelings is to redefine *authority* and *responsibility* (Baum, 1987) in such a way that they can change the meaning of these terms whenever they are confronted with the possibility that they or others might become aware of their shame and guilt. Argyris (1990) called this "fancy footwork" (p. 46). It includes actions that permit individuals to be blind to inconsistencies in their actions or to deny that these inconsistencies even exist; or, if they cannot do either, to place the blame on other people. Fancy footwork means to use all the defensive reasoning and actions to continue the distancing and blindness without holding oneself responsible.

What blocks us is our own representation and corresponding perception of the social setting we live in. According to Argyris (1990), defensive reasoning occurs when individuals (a) hold assumptions of which the validity is questionable, yet they think it is not; (b) make inferences that do not necessarily follow from the assumptions, yet they do it; and (c) reach conclusions that they believe they have tested carefully, yet they have not because the way they have been framed makes them untestable. Holding these premises and believing the inferences are true leads to all sorts of actions that bypass and cover-up the causes. The problem is that discussing these assumptions means eventually letting go of a certainty, which is for many of us an absolutely impossible task. Revans (1966) used the parable of "The Emperor's Clothes" to point out that people can only interpret their emotions and beliefs in the familiar language of what they know. We should clear our minds of the clutter and obstruction that so often we try to pass off as the wisdom of experience. How difficult this is is well illustrated by B. Harvey's "Abilene paradox" on the Internet (www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_iGdiYO7gI), which illustrates that groups of people can take action contrary to the desires of their members, defeating the very purpose they set out to achieve.

Another example that well illustrates what happens when people see what they together are doing to each other is given by Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers (2004):

> After several years of analysis of what was preventing auto engineering teams from working together effectively in order to meet critical timing targets all the team members were together working with so called "causal loop diagrams" or "system maps." As they were analysing they began to see a pattern. When a subspecialty team faced a difficult design issue, they often had a choice: they could apply a quick fix, or they could address the fundamental sources of the problem. Teams could implement quick fixes on their own, whereas more fundamental solutions often required collaboration among different teams. Everyone was under intense time pressure, so quick fixes were the norm—unfortunately, often with unrecognised size effects for other teams. It was as if they suddenly saw what they all knew but didn't know they knew. All the details were very familiar to them—the problems, the reactions, and the strained relationships that characterised their work environment. Now they were actually seeing the systemic pattern that caused this, and they could see that no one individual was to blame. They had created this pattern together. Each team did what made sense to it, but no one saw the larger system—their individual reactions created—a system that consistently produced poor technical solutions, stress, and late cars. As the implications of the system began to sink in, one of the group members said, "My God, look what we're doing to ourselves!" The key word in this statement was "we." Up to this point, there had been someone to blame for every problem: the other teams, their bosses, not

> enough time. When the "theys" go away and the "we" shows up, people's awareness and capabilities change. (pp. 43-44)

Change is only possible for any of us after we recognize our own "clutter and obstructions" and our own perceptual limitations. "Redirecting attention towards the source," as Senge et al. (2004) called it, encompasses empathy but goes further. Dissolving the boundaries between seer and seen leads not only to a deep sense of connection but also to a heightened sense of change. What first appeared as fixed or even rigid begins to appear more dynamic because we're sensing the reality as it is being created, and we perceive our part in creating it. Of course, one must first of all explore to some extent one's own beliefs and assumptions. According to Watzlawick (1990), direct questions are of no great help, because every description presupposes that one steps outside the perceptual frame of that which is to be described. In this line of thought, Watzlawick (1990) and after him, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) referred to the "fence whitewashing scene" (p. 571) from *Tom Sawyer* as an example of how to break this vicious circle. In this scene, the hero is punished by having to whitewash a fence on Saturday afternoon while all the other boys are free to go swimming. To save face and escape his friends' derision, he reinterprets the whole situation and acts as if painting the fence were a rare and highly desirable privilege. This reinterpreting or reframing can be seen as "an intervention that constructs a new reality aspect in place of a former one, whereby the new aspect fits the new becoming situation just as well or better than the old view" (Watzlawick, 1990, p. 147). If the reframing is successful, it can block the often desperate feeling, "I should react, but I cannot." It is not acquiring new information but reinterpreting or reconstructing the same data. The best way to do this, as we see it, is as Schein (1996) puts it: "to discover in a conversational process that the interpretation that someone else puts on a concept is different from one's own" (p. 231).

Discussion and Conclusion

Behavior is seldom entirely rational, based on linear, mechanistic assumptions traditionally associated with the physical sciences. In fact, it is even possible that the other way around is true, that this kind of "rational" conceiving behavior is itself the trigger for the actual "spinning around." Confronted with intentional change, human behavior seldom follows a simple causal pattern, but more likely, a recursive and iterative one. The essence seems to be not to strive directly to pinpoint the deficient behavior and successively try to alter it, but to connect with the means and mechanisms by which an existing (pattern of) behavior is maintained. Of interest here seems also to be the "secondary gain" (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 29), the perceived benefit—or reward—that exists in what for the outsider appears to be (or is in fact) dysfunctional behavior.

Let us look at the example of the business school (Example 4). Because in the eyes of most of the employees the CEO was associated with the painful cutbacks, there was a contagion of affect in mistrusting the CEO in his intentions. Combined with a lack of understanding of what the desired outcomes of the new interventions were, people react impulsively to pull themselves back to their individual workplaces trying to "mind their own business." Meanwhile, the process of mistrust contaminates not only their relationship with the CEO but also the interpersonal relationships with their direct colleagues. Although the CEO copy-pasted the text with the advice from the employees' council, the process oscillated because there was simply no trust, and in the eyes of the members of the council, the suggested solutions didn't comply to the need for a safe place.

Change is a process that probably can best be understood by studying one's self, to know your own reactions, reflexes, assumptions, prejudices, and more, and by doing your own emotional homework: Where do my emotional reactions come from? How can I understand them? This of course applies knowledge and understanding of others. In that sense, we have to understand the micro processes in ourselves and between people. It is clear that this can only be done in an educative way (by yourself and with the help of others). For Examples 1 and 2, at the beginning of this essay, that is, as we see it, the only effective way out.

It will be helpful when contradictive, oscillating, and circular behavioral patterns come to the full awareness level of the minds of all involved parties, and every one of them sees their own part in it. If not, they will reduce performance and commitment, stifle development, and breed frustration and mistrust, as was the case in, for example, the trade union (Example 3). The mechanisms for non-change were in this example far stronger than the desire and the urgency to make change happen. We think that when people are not aware of those mechanisms, change is difficult to realize. Even worse, the situation in the union case diminishes the effort people put into breaking through their own perceptions and appraisal of their surroundings. To do this, "resistance" has to be judged on its merits from multiple perspectives, and the activities of those who see themselves as resistant subjects must be factored into this analysis. But, if people confront their own defensive routines to reduce them, there is a risk of opening a can of worms because the participants themselves probably do not know how to realize such a breakthrough by themselves. This will lead to another round of resistance, as implied in Figure 2. Reinterpreting and reframing our own interpretations can only be done as part of a larger—more collective—reinterpretation or reframing process, which includes all subjects who have a part in the daily routines you want to break through (Van Nistelrooij & Sminia, 2010).

The exchange of interpretations has to be, by all accounts, interactive, reciprocal, and multilateral, and will probably be iterative, without a neat division between adaptive and

regressive behavior. This kind of collective reframing process, which involves large numbers of participants, can be facilitated by using interactive change methods such as "Open Space," "Future Search," "Real Time Strategic Change," "World Café," and "Appreciative Inquiry." But the point we try to make here, as is the case in our Examples 3 and 4, is that even these kinds of interactive interventions can fail when they do not encourage people to espouse what they see as actually happening, or to be frank and open about it. That is, what is being espoused should not contradict what actually happens. Therefore, it isn't all about large group interventions; it is about stimulating and continuing micro processes between people, asking them the right questions, reflecting on the answers from all relevant perspectives, and giving people enough space to experiment with the outcomes.

An essential challenge of intervening in another one's process is that it is helpful to create a (temporary) space where there are (temporary) rules that facilitate the process of inquiry, individual and collective awareness of assumptions, and ditto reframing. The strong point of these so-called large group interventions is that they can create a new space, new relationships between participants, and new rules for the interaction and freedom to espouse: a new platform for dialogue, to make the awareness and reframing possible. The vulnerability lies then of course in the translation and transition of this experience into daily life. If everything returns to the old rules, the familiar space, the existing relationships, and the patterns of interaction that existed before, then the experience and inquiry are of no value. Here lies an important task for the leaders and change agents. They have to play two roles: one, being a participant bringing in openly and reciprocally their own perspective, and second, being a guide facilitating the new "reality" and way of interacting into future practice.

Furthermore, we want to recall that we are talking about organizational change as a complex, messy, day-to-day working practice, rather than a neatly planned organizational change program and design. For anyone who wishes to intervene in this kind of circular interaction with the intent to facilitate a breakthrough, it is far more realistic to expect that people will show certain irregularities, deviations, recurrences, and contradictions in their response, which implies that inconsistent behavior is a much more natural way to respond to a change initiative than we assume. However, a thorough understanding of the way in which each of these components is affected by any specific step in a change process can be helpful in interpreting human response to change.

At the end of this essay, it seems to us that there is a need for an interventionist approach devoted to (a) exploring the clients' and consultants' epistemological assumptions, (b) discerning the effect on thought and action of holding those assumptions, and (c) deliberately bringing about a shift in those assumptions to further outcomes concerning the interaction patterns in groups. One of the interventions we know of that made this happen was the T-group exercise (Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964) "in which each individual learns about his own motives, feelings, and strategies in dealing with other persons" (p. 2). As Bennis later, in 1969, noted (as cited in Burnes & Cooke, 2012), "the values and lessons learnt off-site in T-groups did not equip people to deal with the political dynamics of organizational life" (p. 7). Consequently, as Burns and Cook continue, by the end of the 1960s, the influence of T-groups dramatically declined. But, as Ronald Lippitt, one of the founding fathers of this method, already proclaimed in 1948,

> A lot of people have good will about improving human relations and intergroup relationships, but nothing very effective seems to get accomplished and most of the workers become inactive before long . . . Because of the inadequate plan, or because of our inadequate skills in putting plans into effect through the techniques of influencing others, we bog down, getting apathetic responses or strong resistance. Or because our objectives and steps of accomplishment are so inadequately defined we go along without ever really knowing whether we are making progress or not. . . . And so I (the interventionist) begin to become less and less active, and more and more inclined to make aggressive remarks about "people not being willing to co-operate" . . . So it goes, around the circle . . . (pp. 1-2)

In our view, this is the exact reason why it is so important not only to understand our own behavior and reactions but also to understand group dynamics and to become aware of the sometimes subtle differences in individual assumptions that are lying just below the surface—restraining our and others' behavior.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Argyris, C. (1990). *Overcoming organizational defenses; facilitating organizational learning*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Argyris, C. (1998). Empowerment: The emperor's new clothes. *Harvard Business Review*, *78*, 98-105.

Asch, S. E. (1940). Studies in the principles of judgments and attitudes: II. Determination of judgments by group and by ego standards. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *12*, 433-465.

Atwater, J. B., Kannan, V. R., & Stephens, A. A. (2008). Cultivating systemic thinking change in the next generation of business leaders. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *7*, 9-25.

Azjen, I. (1988). *Attitudes, personality and behavior*. Stony Stratford, UK: Open University Press.

Balogun, J. (2006). Managing change: Steering a course between intended strategies and unanticipated outcomes. *Long Range Planning*, *39*, 29-49.

Balogun, J., & Johnson, G. (2005). From intended strategies to unintended outcomes: The impact of change recipient sensemaking. *Organization Studies*, *26*, 1573-1600.

Bargh, J. A., Chen, M., & Burrows, L. (1996). Automaticity of social behavior: Direct effects of trait construct and stereotype activation on action. *Journal for Personality and Social Psychology*, *71*, 230-244.

Bateson, G. (1976). The case against the case for mind/body dualism. *CoEvolution Quarterly*, *12*, 94-95.

Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York, NY: A. P. Dutton.

Baum, H. S. (1987). *The invisible bureaucracy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Beer, M., Eisenstat, R. A., & Spector, B. (1990). Why change programs don't produce change: Effective corporate renewal starts at the bottom, through informal efforts to solve business problems. *Harvard Business Review*, *1990*, 158-166.

Bergson, H. (1946). *The creative mind*. New York, NY: Carol Publishing Group.

Boulding, E. (1988). *Building a global civic culture: Education for an interdependent world*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Bradford, D. L., Gibb, J. R., & Benne, K. D. (Eds.). (1964). *T group theory and laboratory method*. New York, NY: John Wiley.

Burhans, C. S. Jr. (1973). Spindrift and the sea: Structural patterns and unifying elements in Catch 22. *Twentieth Century Literature*, *19*, 239-250.

Burnes, B., & Cooke, B. (2012). The past, present and future of organization development: Taking the long view. *Human Relations*. Advance online publication.

Cameron, K. (1986). Effectiveness as paradox: Consensus and conflict in conceptions of organizational effectiveness. *Management Science*, *32*, 539-553.

Cartwright, D. (1951). Achieving change in people: Some applications of group dynamics theory. *Human Relations*, *4*, 381-392.

Chin, R., & Benne, K. D. (1976). General strategies for effecting changes in human systems. In W. Bennis, K. D. Benne, R. Chin, & K. E. Corey (Eds.), *The planning of change* (pp. 22-45). New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Darr, A., Astin, K., & Atkin, K. (2008). Causal attributions, lifestyle change and coronary heart disease: Illness beliefs of patients of South Asian and European origin living in the UK. *Heart & Lung: The Journal of Acute and Critical Care*, *37*, 91-104.

Dent, E. B., & Goldberg, S. G. (1999). Challenging "resistance to change." *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *35*, 25-41.

Dijksterhuis, A., Aarts, H., & Smith, P. K. (2005). The power of the subliminal: On subliminal persuasion. In R. R. Hassin, J. S. Uleman, & J. A. Bargh (Eds.), *The new unconscious* (pp. 77-106). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Dijksterhuis, A., & Van Knippenberg, A. (1998). The relation between perception and behavior or how to win a game of trivial pursuit. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 865-877.

Douglas, S. C., Kiewitz, C., Martinko, M. J., Harvey, P., Younhee, K., & Chun, J. U. (2008). Cognitions, emotions and evaluations: An elaboration likelihood model for workplace aggression. *Academy of Management Review*, *33*, 425-451.

Elias, S. M. (2009). Employee commitment in times of change: Assessing the importance of attitudes toward organizational change. *Journal of Management*, *35*, 37-55.

Festinger, L. (1962). Cognitive dissonance. *Scientific American*, *207*, 93-107.

Festinger, L., Schachter, S., & Back, K. (1950). *Social pressures in informal groups: A study of human factors in housing*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Fiorina, C. (2007, May 2). *The dynamics of change and fear.* Stanford Technology Ventures Program. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3IbKbDhfKw

Fishbein, M., & Azjen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention and behavior: An introduction to theory and research*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Fleming, P. (2005). Metaphors of resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *19*, 45-66.

Ford, J. D., & Fedor, D. B. (2009). Stop blaming resistance to change and start using it. *Organizational Dynamics*, *39*, 24-36.

Ford, J. D., Ford, L. W., & McNamara, R. T. (2002). Resistance and the background conversations of change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *15*, 105-121.

Foster-Fishman, P., Nowell, B., & Yang, H. (2007). Putting the system back into systems change: A framework for understanding and changing organizational and community systems. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *39*, 197-215.

Gersick, C. J. G. (1991). Revolutionary change theories: A multilevel exploration of the punctuated equilibrium paradigm. *Academy of Management Review*, *16*, 10-36.

Gibbons, F. X., Gerrard, M., Blanton, H., & Russell, D. W. (1998). Reasoned action and social reaction: Willingness and intention as independent predictors. *Journal for Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 1164-1180.

Hanson, B. G. (1995). *General systems theory: Beginning with wholes*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hanson, E. M. (2002). *Educational administration and organizational behavior* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Holt, D. T., & Vardaman, J. M. (2013). Toward a comprehensive understanding of readiness for change: The case for an expanded conceptualization. *Journal of Change Management*, *13*, 9-18.

Ileris, K. (2004). A model for learning in working life. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, *16*, 431-441.

Isabella, L. A. (1990). Evolving interpretations as a change unfolds: How managers construe key organizational events. *Academy of Management Journal*, *33*, 7-41.

Jaques, E. (1955). Social systems as a defence against persecutory and depressive anxiety. In M. Klein, P. Heimann, & R. E. MoneyKyrle (Eds.), *New directions in psycho-analysis* (pp. 478-498). London: Tavistock Publications; New York: Basic Books.

Jarzabkowski, P. (2004). Strategy as practice: Recursiveness, adaptation and practice in use. *Organization Studies*, *25*, 529-560.

Johnson, R. E., Chang, C., & Lord, R. (2006). Moving from cognition to behavior: What the research says. *Psychological Bulletin*, *132*, 381-415.

Keeney, B. P. (1983). *Aesthetics of change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Keeney, B. P. (2007). Batesonian epistemology, Bushman n/om-kxaosi, and rock art. *Kynetics*, *36*, 884-904.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change; how to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Kloosterboer, P. (2011). *Expeditie naar waarde: strategie ontdekken met professionals* (Expedition to value: Discovering strategy with professionals). The Hague, The Netherlands: Academic Service.

Kotter, J. P. (1995). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, *1995*, 59-67.

Lawrence, P. R. (1969). How to deal with resistance to change. *Harvard Business Review*, *1969*, 1-10.

Lewin, K., & Grabbe, P. (1948). Conduct, knowledge, and acceptance of new values. In K. Lewin & G. W. Lewin (Eds.), *Resolving social conflicts: Selected papers on group dynamics* (pp. 56-68). New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.

Lippitt, R. (1948). *Training and community relations: A research exploration toward new group skills*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.

Lockett, A., Currie, G., Finn, R., Martin, G., & Waring, J. (2014). The influence of social position on sensemaking about organizational change. *Academy of Management Journal*, *57*, 1102-1129.

Lord, R. G., & Levy, P. E. (1994). Moving from cognition to action: A control theory perspective. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, *43*, 335-367.

Luscher, L. S., Lewis, M., & Ingram, A. (2006). The social construction of organizational change paradoxes. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *19*, 491-502.

Mahadevan, J. (2012). Utilizing identity-based resistance for diversity change: A narrative approach. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *25*, 819-834.

Maitlis, S. (2005). The social processes of organizational sense making. *Academy of Management Journal*, *48*, 21-49.

Maitlis, S., & Christianson, M. (2014). Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *The Academy of Management Annals*, *8*, 57-125.

Marrow, A. J. (1969). *The practical theorist: The life and work of Kurt Lewin*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

McGregor, D. (1960). *The human side of enterprise*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Menzies-Lyth, I. E. P. (1960). A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defense against anxiety. *Human Relations*, *13*, 95-121.

O'Hanlon, B., & Wilk, J. (1987). *Shifting contexts: The generation of effective psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Guildford Press.

Oreg, S., & Sverdlik, N. (2011). Ambivalence toward imposed change: The conflict between dispositional resistance to change and the orientation toward the change agent. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *96*, 337-349.

Peters, L. (2012). The rhythm of leading change: Living with a paradox. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *21*, 405-411.

Piderit, S. K. (2000). Rethinking resistance and recognizing ambivalence: A multidimensional view of attitudes toward organizational change. *Academy of Management Review*, *25*, 783-794.

Prochaska, J. O., Norcross, J. C., & Diclemente, C. C. (1994). *Changing for good: The revolutionary program that explains the six stages of change and teaches you how to free yourself from bad habits*. New York, NY: William Morrow.

Rapoport, R. N. (1956). Oscillations and sociotherapy. *Human Relations*, *9*, 357-373.

Revans, R. W. (1966). *The theory of practice in management*. London, England: MacDonald.

Schein, E. H. (1990). Organizational culture. *American Psychologist*, *45*, 109-119.

Schein, E. H. (1996). Culture: The missing concept in organization studies. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *41*, 229-240.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The arts and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Senge, P. M., Scharmer, C. O., Jaworski, J., & Flowers, B. S. (2004). *Presence: Human purpose and the field of the future*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Seo, M. G., & Creed, W. E. D. (2002). Institutional contradictions, praxis, and institutional change: A dialectical perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, *27*, 222-247.

Seong, S., Kim, Y., & Szulanski, G. (2015). Leadership, innovation, and strategic change: A conversation with Michael Tushman. *Journal of Management Inquiry*. Advance online publication

Shapiro, E. R., & Carr, A. W. (1991). *Lost in familiar places: Creating new connections between the individual and society*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sluzki, C. E., & Ransom, D. C. (1976). The double bind as a universal pathogenic situation (1971). In C. E. Sluzki & D. C. Ransom (Eds.), *Double bind: The foundation of the communicational approach to the family* (pp. 251-262). New York, NY: Grune & Stratton.

Sminia, H., & Van Nistelrooij, A. T. M. (2006). Strategic management and organization development: Planned change in a public sector organization. *Journal of Change Management*, *6*, 99-113.

Smith, W. K. (2014). Dynamic decision making: A model of senior leaders managing strategic paradoxes. *Academy of Management Journal*, *57*, 1592-1623.

Smith, W. K., Binns, A., & Tushman, M. L. (2010). Complex business models: Managing strategic paradoxes simultaneously. *Long Range Planning*, *43*, 448-461.

Stephan, E., Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (2011). The effects of time perspective and level of construal on social distance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *47*, 397-402.

Szabla, D. B. (2007). A multidimensional view of resistance to organizational change: Exploring cognitive, emotional, and intentional responses to planned change across perceived change leadership strategies. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *18*, 525-558.

Thomas, R., Sargent, L. D., & Hardy, C. (2011). Managing organizational change: Negotiating meaning and power-resistance relations. *Organizations Science*, *22*, 22-41.

Tsoukas, H., & Chia, R. (2002). On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, *13*, 567-599.

Van Nistelrooij, A. T. M., & Sminia, H. (2010). Organization development: What's happening? *Journal of Change Management*, *10*, 409-422.

Watzlawick, P. (1978). *The language of change; elements of therapeutic communication*. New York: Basic Books.
Watzlawick, P. (1990). *Münchhausen's pigtail or psychotherapy and reality: Essays and lectures* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Norton.
Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., & Jackson, D. D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes*. New York, NY: Norton.
Wood, W. (2000). Attitude change: Persuasion and social influence. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *51*, 539-570.

Author Biographies

Antonie van Nistelrooij is assistant professor 'Organizational change & Development' at the VU University in Amsterdam, senior partner at the Alignment.nu consultantgroup and a lecturer and academic supervisor for several Dutch MBA's and in company programs.

Léon de Caluwé is senior partner at Twynstra Group and professor emeritus at the VU University in Amsterdam. He heads the Center for Research on Consultancy (CRC) is a board member of the Management Consultancy Division of the Academy of Management.